Customers in the electronics section of a department store watch as JFK addresses the nation, October 22, 1962.

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EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Real Cuban Missile Crisis

EVERYTHING YOU THINK YOU KNOW IS WRONG.

By Benjamin Schwarz

On October 16, 1962, John F. Kennedy and his advisers were stunned to learn that the Soviet Union was, without provocation, installing nuclear-armed medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Cuba. With these offensive weapons, which represented a new and existential threat to America, Moscow significantly raised the ante in the nuclear rivalry between the superpowers—a gambit that forced the United States and the Soviet Union to the brink of nuclear Armageddon. On October 22, the president, with no other recourse, proclaimed in a televised address that his administration knew of the illegal missiles, and delivered an ultimatum insisting on their removal, announcing an American "quarantine" of Cuba to force compliance with his demands. While carefully avoiding provocative action and coolly calibrating each Soviet countermeasure, Kennedy and his lieutenants brooked no compromise; they held firm, despite Moscow's efforts to link a resolution to extrinsic issues and despite predictable Soviet blustering about American aggression and violation of international law. In the tense 13-day crisis, the Americans and Soviets went eyeball-to-eyeball. Thanks to the Kennedy administration's placid resolve and prudent crisis management—thanks to what Kennedy's special assistant Arthur Schlesinger Jr. characterized as the president's "combination of toughness and restraint, of will, nerve, and wisdom,

THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS IN AMERICAN MEMORY

Sheldon M. Stern

STANFORD

so brilliantly controlled, so matchlessly calibrated, that [it] dazzled the world"—the Soviet leadership blinked: Moscow dismantled the missiles, and a cataclysm was averted.

Every sentence in the above paragraph describing the Cuban missile crisis is misleading or erroneous. But this was the rendition of events that the Kennedy administration fed to a credulous press; this was the history that the participants in Washington promulgated in their memoirs; and this is the story that has insinuated itself into the national memory—as the pundits' commentaries and media coverage marking the 50th anniversary of the crisis attested.

The Soviets suspected that the U.S. viewed a nuclear first strike as an attractive option. They were right to be suspicious.

Scholars, however, have long known a very different story: since 1997, they have had access to recordings that Kennedy secretly made of meetings with his top advisers, the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (the "ExComm"). Sheldon M. Stern—who was the historian at the John F. Kennedy Library for 23 years and the first scholar to evaluate the ExComm tapes—is among the numerous historians who have tried to set the record straight. His new book marshals irrefutable evidence to succinctly demolish the mythic version of the crisis. Although there's little reason to believe his effort will be to any avail, it should nevertheless be applauded.

Reached through sober analysis, Stern's conclusion that "John F. Kennedy and his administration, without question, bore a substantial share of the responsibility for the onset of the Cuban missile crisis" would have shocked the American people in 1962, for the simple reason that Kennedy's administration had misled them about the military imbalance between the superpowers and had concealed its campaign of threats, assassination plots, and sabotage designed to overthrow the government in Cuba—an effort well known to Soviet and Cuban officials.

In the 1960 presidential election, Kennedy had cynically attacked Richard Nixon from the right, claiming that the Eisenhower-Nixon administration had allowed a dangerous "missile gap" to grow in the U.S.S.R.'s favor. But in fact, just as Eisenhower and Nixon had suggested—and just as the classified briefings that Kennedy received as a presidential candidate indicated—the missile gap, and the nuclear balance generally, was overwhelmingly to America's advantage. At the time of the missile crisis, the Soviets had 36 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), 138 long-range bombers with 392 nuclear warheads, and 72 submarine-launched ballistic-missile warheads (SLBMs). These forces were arrayed against a vastly more powerful U.S. nuclear arsenal of 203 ICBMs, 1,306 long-range bombers with 3,104 nuclear warheads, and 144 SLBMs—all told, about nine times as many nuclear weapons as the U.S.S.R. Nikita Khrushchev was acutely aware of America's huge advantage not just in the number of weapons but in their quality and deployment as well.

Moreover, despite America's overwhelming nuclear preponderance, JFK, in keeping with his avowed aim to pursue a foreign policy characterized by "vigor," had ordered the largest peacetime expansion of America's military power, and specifically the colossal growth of its strategic nuclear forces. This included deploying, beginning in 1961, intermediate-range "Jupiter" nuclear missiles in Italy and Turkey—adjacent to the Soviet Union. From there, the missiles could reach all of the western U.S.S.R., including Moscow and Leningrad (and that doesn't count the nuclear-armed "Thor" missiles that the U.S. already had aimed at the Soviet Union from bases in Britain).

The Jupiter missiles were an exceptionally vexing component of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Because they sat aboveground, were immobile, and required a long time to prepare for launch, they were extremely vulnerable. Of no value as a deterrent, they appeared to be weapons meant for a disarming first strike—and thus greatly undermined deterrence, because they encouraged a preemptive Soviet strike against them. The Jupiters' destabilizing effect was widely recognized among defense experts within and outside the U.S. government and even by congressional leaders. For instance, Senator Albert Gore Sr., an ally of the administration, told Secretary of State Dean Rusk that they were a "provocation" in a closed session of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in February 1961 (more than a year and a half before the missile crisis), adding, "I wonder what our attitude would be" if the Soviets deployed nuclear-armed missiles to Cuba. Senator Claiborne Pell raised an identical argument in a memo passed on to Kennedy in May 1961.

Given America's powerful nuclear superiority, as well as the deployment of the Jupiter missiles, Moscow suspected that Washington viewed a nuclear first strike as an attractive option. They were right to be suspicious. The archives reveal that in fact the Kennedy administration had strongly considered this option during the Berlin crisis in 1961.

It's little wonder, then, that, as Stern asserts—drawing on a plethora of scholarship including, most convincingly, the historian Philip Nash's elegant 1997 study, *The Other Missiles of October*—Kennedy's deployment of the Jupiter missiles "was a key reason for Khrushchev's decision to send nuclear missiles to Cuba." Khrushchev reportedly made that decision in May 1962, declaring to a confidant that the Americans "have surrounded us with bases on all sides" and that missiles in Cuba would help to counter an "intolerable provocation." Keeping the deployment secret in order to present the U.S. with a fait accompli, Khrushchev may very well have assumed America's response would be similar to his reaction to the Jupiter missiles—rhetorical denouncement but no threat or action to thwart the deployment with a military attack, nuclear or otherwise. (In retirement, Khrushchev explained his reasoning to the American journalist Strobe Talbott: Americans "would learn just what it feels like to have enemy missiles pointing at you; we'd be doing nothing more than giving them a little of their own medicine.")

Khrushchev was also motivated by his entirely justifiable belief that the Kennedy administration wanted to destroy the Castro regime. After all, the

administration had launched an invasion of Cuba; had followed that with sabotage, paramilitary assaults, and assassination attempts—the largest clandestine operation in the history of the CIA—and had organized large-scale military exercises in the Caribbean clearly meant to rattle the Soviets and their Cuban client. Those actions, as Stern and other scholars have demonstrated, helped compel the Soviets to install the missiles so as to deter "covert or overt US attacks"—in much the same way that the United States had shielded its allies under a nuclear umbrella to deter Soviet subversion or aggression against them.

REMARKABLY, GIVEN the alarmed and confrontational posture that Washington adopted during the missile crisis, the tapes of the ExComm deliberations, which Stern has minutely assessed, reveal that Kennedy and his advisers understood the nuclear situation in much the same way Khrushchev did. On the first day of the crisis, October 16, when pondering Khrushchev's motives for sending the missiles to Cuba, Kennedy made what must be one of the most staggeringly absentminded (or sarcastic) observations in the annals of American national-security policy: "Why does he put these in there, though? ... It's just as if we suddenly began to put a *major* number of MRBMs [medium-range ballistic missiles] in Turkey. Now that'd be *goddamned dangerous*, I would think." McGeorge Bundy, the national security adviser, immediately pointed out: "Well we did it, Mr. President."

Once that was straightened out, Kennedy himself declared repeatedly that the Jupiter missiles were "the same" as the Soviet missiles in Cuba. Rusk, in discussing the Soviet motivation for sending missiles to Cuba, cited CIA Director John McCone's view that Khrushchev "knows that we have a substantial nuclear superiority ... He also knows that we don't really live under fear of his nuclear weapons to the extent that he has to live under fear of ours. Also, we have nuclear weapons nearby, in Turkey." The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Maxwell Taylor, had already acknowledged that the Soviets' primary purpose in installing missiles in Cuba was "to supplement their rather defective ICBM system."

Kennedy and his civilian advisers understood that the missiles in Cuba did not alter the strategic nuclear balance. Although Kennedy asserted in his October 22 televised address that the missiles were "an explicit threat to the peace and security of all the Americas," he in fact appreciated, as he told the ExComm on the first day of the crisis, that "it doesn't make any difference if you get blown up by an ICBM flying from the Soviet Union or one that was 90 miles away. Geography doesn't mean that much." America's European allies, Kennedy continued, "will argue that *taken at its worst* the presence of these missiles really doesn't change" the nuclear balance.

That the missiles were close to the United States was, as the president conceded, immaterial: the negligible difference in flight times between Soviet Union–based ICBMs and Cuba-based missiles wouldn't change the consequences when the missiles hit their targets, and in any event, the flight times of Soviet SLBMs were already as short as or shorter than the flight times of the missiles in Cuba would be, because those weapons already lurked in submarines off the American coast (as of course did American SLBMs off the Soviet coast). Moreover, unlike Soviet ICBMs, the missiles in Cuba required several hours to be prepared for launch. Given the effectiveness of America's aerial and satellite reconnaissance (amply demonstrated by the images of missiles in the U.S.S.R. and Cuba that they yielded), the U.S. almost certainly would have had far more time to detect and respond to an imminent Soviet missile strike from Cuba than to attacks from Soviet bombers, ICBMs, or SLBMs.

The Soviets were entirely justified in their belief that Kennedy wanted to destroy the Castro regime.

"A missile is a missile," Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara asserted. "It makes no great difference whether you are killed by a missile from the Soviet

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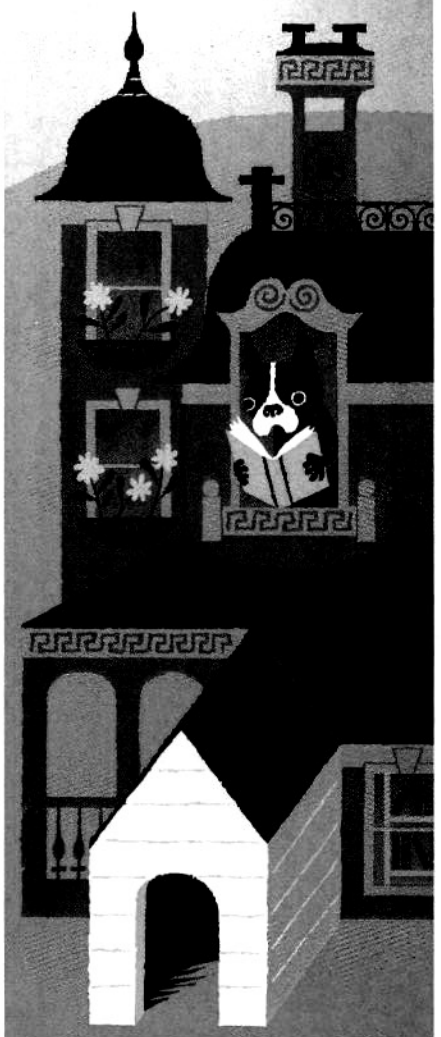

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Union or Cuba." On that first day of the ExComm meetings, Bundy asked directly, "What is the strategic impact on the position of the United States of MRBMs in Cuba? How gravely *does* this *change* the strategic balance?" McNamara answered, "Not at all"—a verdict that Bundy then said he fully supported. The following day, Special Counsel Theodore Sorensen summarized the views of the ExComm in a memorandum to Kennedy. "It is generally agreed," he noted, "that these missiles, even when fully operational, do not significantly alter the balance of power—i.e., they do not significantly increase the potential megatonnage capable of being unleashed on American soil, even after a surprise American nuclear strike."

Kennedy and his civilian advisers understood that the missiles in Cuba did not alter the strategic nuclear balance.

Sorensen's comment about a surprise attack reminds us that while the missiles in Cuba did not add appreciably to the nuclear menace, they could have somewhat complicated America's planning for a successful first strike—which may well have been part of Khrushchev's rationale for deploying them. If so, the missiles paradoxically could have enhanced deterrence between the superpowers, and thereby reduced the risk of nuclear war.

YET, ALTHOUGH the missiles' military significance was negligible, the Kennedy administration advanced on a perilous course to force their removal. The president issued an ultimatum to a nuclear power—an astonishingly provocative move, which immediately created a crisis that could have led to catastrophe. He ordered a blockade on Cuba, an act of war that we now know brought the superpowers within a hair's breadth of nuclear confrontation. The beleaguered Cubans willingly accepted their ally's weapons, so the Soviet's deployment of the missiles was fully in accord with international law. But the blockade, even if the administration euphemistically called it a "quarantine," was, the ExComm members acknowledged, illegal. As the State Department's legal adviser recalled, "*Our* legal problem was that their action *wasn't* illegal." Kennedy and his lieutenants intently contemplated an invasion of Cuba and an aerial assault on the Soviet missiles there—acts extremely likely to have provoked a nuclear war. In light of the extreme measures they executed or earnestly entertained to resolve a crisis they had largely created, the American reaction to the missiles requires, in retrospect, as much explanation as the Soviet decision to deploy them—or more.

On that very first day of the ExComm meetings, McNamara provided a wider perspective on the missiles' significance: "I'll be quite frank. I don't think there is a military problem here ... This is a domestic, political problem." In a 1987 interview, McNamara explained: "You have to remember that, right from the beginning, it was President Kennedy who said that it was *politically* unacceptable for us to leave those missile sites alone. He didn't say militarily, he said *politically*." What largely made the missiles politically unacceptable was Kennedy's conspicuous and fervent hostility toward the Castro regime—a stance, Kennedy admitted at an ExComm meeting, that America's European allies thought was "a fixation" and "slightly demented."

In his presidential bid, Kennedy had red-baited the Eisenhower-Nixon administration, charging that its policies had "helped make Communism's first Caribbean base." Given that he had defined a tough stance toward Cuba as an important election issue, and given the humiliation he had suffered with the Bay of Pigs debacle, the missiles posed a great political hazard to Kennedy. As the State Department's director of intelligence and research, Roger Hilsman, later put it, "The United States might not be in mortal danger, but ... the administration most certainly was." Kennedy's friend John Kenneth Galbraith, the ambassador to India, later said: "Once [the missiles] were there, the political needs of the Kennedy administration urged it to take almost any risk to get them out."

But even weightier than the domestic

GALLERY **Walking** *by Nishant Choksi*

political catastrophe likely to befall the administration if it appeared to be soft on Cuba was what Assistant Secretary of State Edwin Martin called "the psychological factor" that we "sat back and let 'em do it to us." He asserted that this was "more important than the *direct* threat," and Kennedy and his other advisers energetically concurred. Even as Sorensen, in his memorandum to the president, noted the ExComm's consensus that the Cuban missiles didn't alter the nuclear balance, he also observed that the ExComm nevertheless believed that "the United States cannot tolerate the *known* presence" of missiles in Cuba "if our courage and commitments are ever to be believed by either allies or adversaries" (emphasis added). America's European allies (not to mention the Soviets) insisted that Washington should ignore these intangible concerns, but Sorensen was dismissive. Appealing to psychology rather than to the hard calculations of statecraft, he asserted that such arguments "carried some logic but little weight."

Indeed, Washington's self-regard for its credibility was almost certainly the main reason it risked nuclear war over a negligible threat to national security. At the same meeting in which Kennedy and his aides were contemplating military action against Cuba and the U.S.S.R.—action they knew could bring about an apocalyptic war—the president stated, "Last month I said we weren't going to [permit Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba] and last month I should have said ... we don't care. But when we said we're *not* going to, and [the Soviets] go ahead and do it, and then we do nothing, then ... I would think that our ... risks *increase*."

The risks of such a cave-in, Kennedy and his advisers held, were distinct but related. The first was that America's foes would see Washington as pusillanimous; the known presence of the missiles, Kennedy said, "makes them look like they're coequal with us and that"—here Treasury Secretary Douglas Dillon interrupted: "We're scared of the Cubans." The second risk was that America's friends would suddenly doubt that a country given to appeasement could be relied on to fulfill its obligations.

In fact, America's allies, as Bundy acknowledged, were aghast that the U.S. was threatening nuclear war over a strategically insignificant condition—the presence of intermediate-range missiles in a neighboring country—that those allies (and, for that matter, the Soviets) had been living with for years. In the tense days of October 1962, being allied with the United States potentially amounted to, as Charles de Gaulle had warned, "annihilation without representation." It seems never to have occurred to Kennedy and the ExComm that whatever Washington gained by demonstrating the steadfastness of its commitments, it lost in an erosion of confidence in its judgment.

This approach to foreign policy was guided—and remains guided—by an elaborate theorizing rooted in a schoolplayground view of world politics rather than the cool appraisal of strategic realities. It put—and still puts—America in the curious position of having to go to war to uphold the very credibility that is supposed to obviate war in the first place.

If the administration's domestic political priorities alone dictated the removal of the Cuban missiles, a solution to Kennedy's problem would have seemed pretty obvious: instead of a public ultimatum demanding that the Soviets withdraw their missiles from Cuba, a private agreement between the superpowers to remove both Moscow's missiles in Cuba and Washington's missiles in Turkey. (Recall that the Kennedy administration discovered the missiles on October 16, but only announced its discovery to the American public and the Soviets and issued its ultimatum on the 22nd.)

The administration, however, did not make such an overture to the Soviets. Instead, by publicly demanding

a unilateral Soviet withdrawal and imposing a blockade on Cuba, it precipitated what remains to this day the most dangerous nuclear crisis in history. In the midst of that crisis, the sanest and most sensible observers—among them diplomats at the United Nations and in Europe, the editorial writers for the *Manchester Guardian*, Walter Lippmann, and Adlai Stevenson—saw a missile trade as a fairly simple solution. In an effort to resolve the impasse, Khrushchev himself openly made this proposal on October 27. According to the version of events propagated by the Kennedy administration (and long accepted as historical fact), Washington unequivocally rebuffed Moscow's offer and instead, thanks to Kennedy's resolve, forced a unilateral Soviet withdrawal.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr. "repeatedly manipulated and obscured the facts."

Beginning in the late 1980s, however, the opening of previously classified archives and the decision by a number of participants to finally tell the truth revealed that the crisis was indeed resolved by an explicit but concealed deal to remove both the Jupiter and the Cuban missiles. Kennedy in fact threatened to abrogate if the Soviets disclosed it. He did so for the same reasons that had largely engendered the crisis in the first place—domestic politics and the maintenance of America's image as the indispensable nation. A declassified Soviet cable reveals that Robert Kennedy—whom the president assigned to work out the secret swap with the U.S.S.R.'s ambassador to Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin—insisted on returning to Dobrynin the formal Soviet letter affirming the agreement, explaining that the letter "could cause irreparable harm to my political career in the future."

Only a handful of administration officials knew about the trade; most members of the ExComm, including Vice President Lyndon Johnson, did not. And in their effort to maintain the cover-up, a number of those who did, including McNamara and Rusk, lied to Congress. JFK and others tacitly encouraged the character assassination of Stevenson, allowing him to be portrayed as an appeaser who "wanted a Munich" for suggesting the trade—a deal that they vociferously maintained the administration would never have permitted.

The patient spadework of Stern and other scholars has since led to further revelations. Stern demonstrates that Robert Kennedy hardly inhabited the conciliatory and statesmanlike role during the crisis that his allies described in their hagiographic chronicles and memoirs and that he himself advanced in his posthumously published book, *Thirteen Days*. In fact, he was among the most consistently and recklessly hawkish of the president's advisers, pushing not for a blockade or even air strikes against Cuba but for a full-scale invasion as "the last chance we will have to destroy Castro." Stern authoritatively concludes that "if RFK had been president, and the views he expressed during the ExComm meetings had prevailed, nuclear war would have been the nearly certain outcome." He justifiably excoriates the sycophantic courtier Schlesinger, whose histories "repeatedly manipulated and obscured the facts" and whose accounts—"profoundly misleading if not out-and-out deceptive"—were written to serve not scholarship but the Kennedys.

ALTHOUGH STERN and other scholars have upended the panegyrical version of events advanced by Schlesinger and other Kennedy acolytes, the revised chronicle shows that JFK's actions in resolving the crisis—again, a crisis he had largely created—were reasonable, responsible, and courageous. Plainly shaken by the apocalyptic potentialities of the situation, Kennedy advocated, in the face of the bellicose and near-unanimous opposition of his pseudo-tough-guy advisers, accepting the missile swap that Khrushchev had proposed. "To any man at the United Nations, or any other *rational* man, it will look like a very fair trade," he levelheadedly told the ExComm. "Most people think that if you're allowed an even trade you ought to take advantage of it." He clearly understood that history and world opinion would condemn him and his country for going to war—a war almost certain to escalate to a nuclear exchange—after the U.S.S.R. had publicly offered such a reasonable quid pro quo. Khrushchev's proposal, the historian Ronald Steel has noted, "filled the White House advisors with consternation—not least of all because it appeared perfectly fair."

Although Kennedy in fact agreed to the missile swap and, with Khrushchev, helped settle the confrontation maturely, the legacy of that confrontation was nonetheless pernicious. By successfully hiding the deal from the vice president, from a generation of foreign-policy makers and strategists, and from the American public, Kennedy and his team reinforced the dangerous notion that firmness in the face of what the United States construes as aggression, and the graduated escalation of military threats and action in countering that aggression, makes for a successful national-security strategy—really, all but defines it.

The president and his advisers also reinforced the concomitant view that America should define a threat not merely as circumstances and forces that directly jeopardize the safety of the country, but as circumstances and forces that might indirectly compel potential allies or enemies to question America's resolve. This recondite calculation led to the American disaster in Vietnam: in attempting to explain how the loss of the strategically inconsequential country of South Vietnam might weaken American credibility and thereby threaten the country's security, one of McNamara's closest aides, Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton, allowed that "it takes some sophistication to see how Vietnam automatically involves" our vital interests. Kennedy said in his address to the nation during the missile crisis that "aggressive conduct, if allowed to go unchecked and unchallenged, ultimately leads to war." He explained that "if our courage and our commitments are ever to be trusted again by either friend or foe," then the United States could not tolerate such conduct by the Soviets—even though, again, he had privately acknowledged that the deployment of the missiles did not change the nuclear balance.

This notion that standing up to

aggression (however loosely and broadly defined) will deter future aggression (however loosely and broadly defined) fails to weather historical scrutiny. After all, America's invasion and occupation of Iraq didn't deter Muammar Qaddafi; America's war against Yugoslavia didn't deter Saddam Hussein in 2003; America's liberation of Kuwait did not deter Slobodan Milošević; America's intervention in Panama did not deter Saddam Hussein in 1991; America's intervention in Grenada did not deter Manuel Noriega; America's war against North Vietnam did not deter Grenada's strongman, Hudson Austin; and JFK's confrontation with Khrushchev over missiles in Cuba certainly did not deter Ho Chi Minh.

Moreover, the idea that a foreign power's effort to counter the overwhelming strategic supremacy of the United States—a country that spends nearly as much on defense as does the rest of the world combined—ipso facto imperils America's security is profoundly misguided. Just as Kennedy and his advisers perceived a threat in Soviet efforts to offset what was in fact a destabilizing U.S. nuclear hegemony, so today, both liberals and conservatives oxymoronically assert that the safety of the United States demands that the country must "balance" China by maintaining its strategically dominant position in East Asia and the eastern Pacific—that is, in China's backyard. This means that Washington views as a hazard Beijing's attempts to remedy the weakness of its own position, even though policy makers acknowledge that the U.S. has a crushing superiority right up to the edge of the Asian mainland. America's posture, however, reveals more about its own ambitions than it does about China's. Imagine that the situation were reversed, and China's air and naval forces were a dominant and potentially menacing presence on the coastal shelf of North America. Surely the U.S. would want to counteract that preponderance. In a vast part of the globe, stretching from the Canadian Arctic to Tierra del Fuego and from Greenland to Guam, the U.S. will not tolerate another great power's interference. Certainly America's security wouldn't be jeopardized if other great powers enjoy their own (and for that matter, smaller) spheres of influence.

This esoteric strategizing—this misplaced obsession with credibility, this dangerously expansive concept of what constitutes security—which has afflicted both Democratic and Republican administrations, and both liberals and conservatives, is the antithesis of statecraft, which requires discernment based on power, interest, and circumstance. It is a stance toward the world that can easily doom the United States to military commitments and interventions in strategically insignificant places over intrinsically trivial issues. It is a stance that can engender a foreign policy approximating paranoia in an obdurately chaotic world abounding in states, personalities, and ideologies that are unsavory and uncongenial—but not necessarily mortally hazardous. ■

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